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Violence and Fragmentation in Congo's Political Marketplace

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The Conflict Research Programme is a four-year research programme hosted by LSE IDEAS and funded by the UK Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Our goal is to understand and analyse the nature of contemporary conflict and to identify international interventions that ‘work’ in the sense of reducing violence or contributing more broadly to the security of individuals and communities who experience conflict.

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Executive Summary

Over thirty years of conflict in eastern Congo have been marked by a deepening of the role of violence in politics as well as a progressive fragmentation of the landscape of armed groups. Deepening insecurity in eastern Congo coincides with competition over political power on the national level between the political networks around Felix Tshisekedi and Joseph Kabila. This report explores the relations between political dynamics on the national level and in the east, analyzing the historical evolution and properties of the Congo's political economy of conflict and testing a political marketplace lens—an approach that foregrounds how the conduct of elites mirrors that of firms competing in a marketplace.

According to this perspective, **Congo is best understood as a complex amalgamation of relatively autonomous but nonetheless interlocking and embedded political marketplaces.** To understand this, it is necessary to note that as a counterpoint to the centripetal forces of colonial administration and later development projects, it is also possible to identify a consistent historical drive towards fragmentation in Congo, ranging from precolonial institutions designed to curb the buildup of centralized power in any one chief to the conscious divide-and-rule tactics that Mobutu deployed to prevent possible contenders from building up too much autonomous power, to the current-day fragmentation of the political marketplace for force.

As a result, whereas the national political marketplace centered on Kinshasa today forms one key marketplace, eastern Congo forms a segmented violent political marketplace which stretches across national borders and is in turn home to more localized nested markets. **In each of these political markets, armed groups and violence play a different role,** and we examine how these political markets mutually influence each other. Fragmentation also means a higher variety of factors that drive conflict: dynamics from one place to the next can be radically different. It might be that a relatively stable political bargain is in place in one area, but that a nearby area is subject to instability in dynamics which seem to obey their own marketplace logic.

Rather than looking for discrete actors along formal institutional lines, this means we have to enquire **how power in Congo is distributed through dynamic networks that straddle different political marketplaces, internal and external borders, as well as state-society and traditional-modern divides.** These networks are dominated by political entrepreneurs, who enter into temporary alliances with one another, and maintain of clusters of proxies, clients, collaborators, and retainers. By examining these networks, the way they are formed, compete and collude, and around what resources they revolve, we can come to terms with the contours of Congo's highly fragmented political marketplace. The question then is **how these networks try to build their power and how these compete, which resources they mobilize, and eventually, how they shape politics at large.**

Resulting from historical tendencies that originate in the colonial era, the national political marketplace revolves around competition over areas of key political and economic importance; and in its latest iteration, struggles between president Tshisekedi and former president Kabila center on control over positions in the industrial mining sector, the political apparatus, and the security forces. They have limited reasons to engage with the small-scale rebel groups in remote rural areas of the east, when these do not muster meaningful military strength or national political significance. What is more, insecurity in the various localized marketplaces may be indirectly useful to generate patronage resources and undermine the political legitimacy of the opposing camp. The paper explores these questions through the notion of multi-level bargaining, a concept to capture how political entrepreneurs in Congo trade violence in one marketplace for cash or influence in another. It also explores the different roles of the Congolese army in Congo's political marketplace.

The profound fragmentation and increasing militarization in eastern Congo has led to a political marketplace that is profoundly in flux. In part, this short-term fluctuation is a good proxy for the instability of political bargains. In part, this dynamism is also due to the fact that cash funding in eastern Congo's political marketplace is, in contrast to earlier periods, not only contingent on patronage, but also heavily dependent on decentralized and localized foraging strategies.

1. Introduction

After nearly three decades of continuing armed conflict, it is safe to say that violence is not an aberration to politics but that it is an integral part of how politics is conducted in eastern Congo. Over the past ten years, the number of rebel groups has multiplied by a factor of ten, in a choreography of endless schisms, shifting alliances and temporary mobilizations—and there's no indication that this will end anytime soon. These patterns aren't an indication of transient or under-developed politics, but reflect the vibrancy of a violent political dynamic of which rebels are an integral part. Rebels and other violent actors don't stand outside of meaningful politics but form key actors in complex processes of bargaining for power between political entrepreneurs on different levels, inside and outside of Congo.

An increasing number of analysts and academics use the notion of the political marketplace as a lens to analyse the political economy of violence in turbulent societies, and to inform policy interventions. It is an alternative to approaches which focus narrowly on the role of minerals or other economic 'drivers of conflict' as well as to explanations of conflict based on formal institutional dynamics. In this report, the term 'political marketplace' is conceived of as an open political system on the margins of global capitalism, in which political and economic conduct are underdetermined by formal institutions and where cooperation and allegiance are instead exchanged via transactional politics.

The political marketplace framework (henceforth PMF) is interested in changes to monetised, conflict-affected political systems over time, based on the assumption that turbulence and instability are the norm. It is built around a series of assumptions about political actors, their objectives and motivations, the role of political finance, and institutions. The first basic feature of violent political marketplaces—and perhaps all political systems—is that politics is transactional, i.e., that deal-making trumps apparent ideological oppositions. In short, a political marketplace is 'a system of governance run on the basis of personal transactions in which political services and allegiances are exchanged for material reward in a competitive manner' (de Waal, 2016: 1). What sets apart violent political marketplaces is that here violence is not political bargaining by other means but rather a key institutionalised currency.

Secondly, this centrality of bargaining means that political entrepreneurs in a political market seek to increase their power by expanding their 'budgets'. What sets apart political marketplaces from hypothetical 'economic' marketplaces, is the central role of coercion as a 'resource' on the same footing as cash. This is because ultimately, any profit is contingent on coercion, and because no-one in a *political marketplace* holds all the instruments of violence.

Thirdly, the PMF is interested in identifying the structure of a political marketplace, by locating a political system at any point of time along the continuum between free competition, oligopoly, and centralized or authoritarian kleptocracy. Conceptualizing a political economy

in terms of a political marketplace is helpful to gain insight into the motivations of political actors, to understand the behaviour of actors in contexts where formal institutions are weak or absent, as well as the role of violence as an intricate part of political deal-making, and not as an alternative to it. Additionally, looking at how behaviour is influenced by the structure of political marketplaces can help foster a better understanding of change over time.

As a context in which political process only very partially conducted via formal institutions and where the instruments of violence are heavily dispersed and contested, Congo is an ideal setting to study the modalities of exchange of political marketplaces. Its basic tenets certainly resonate among political entrepreneurs in Congo. In May 2020, the former governor of mineral-rich Haut Katanga lamented that 'the resources of this country only profit an oligarchy based in Kinshasa which has of late renewed itself through cooptation or through fake elections based on obscurantism'.¹ This echoes a number of key assumptions of the PMF: the idea that Congo's political marketplace is essentially an oligarchy; that the elite in Kinshasa channels the country's resources to itself; and that behind the smokescreen of formal institutions, hidden forms of transactional politics constitute the real political process. The pivotal importance of both cash and violence for the conduct of politics are also evident. As an example, when Joseph Kabila was still president, his family not only branched out into all possible different business sectors via over eighty companies, but also manoeuvred loyal people into key positions in the military and politics—which in themselves constitute positions of economic accumulation (CRG 2017). It is important to occupy key nodes in both for any to be feasible: without the economic positions, no way to fund the other, and vice versa. However, the resonance of the PMF framework in Congo is probably best captured by *Marechal Mobutu*, who lamented in his famous 1977 speech about *le mal zairois*:

'Everything is for sale, everything is bought in our country. And in this traffic, holding any slice of public power constitutes a veritable exchange instrument, convertible into illicit acquisition of money or other goods ... Worse, even the use, by an individual, of his most legitimate right is subjected to an invisible tax, openly pocketed by individuals... accordingly, our society risks losing its political character, to become one vast market-place, ruled by the basest laws of traffic and exploitation'.²

If transactional politics have formed a continual political reality ever since Mobutu's speech until today, it shouldn't come as a surprise that Congolese have along the way developed a rich vocabulary to describe and engage in monetized politics. One of the most famous such terms allegedly hailed from this very same speech. He coined the now-famous Lingala phrase *yiba moke* to advise Zairians to 'steal just a little' or, perhaps, 'steal with caution'. Intended as a moderating counsel, Mobutu's words have come to epitomize the scale of private appropriation of public funds under his rule, as well as the corruption, which was the essential grease that

1 <https://actualite.cd/2020/05/19/rdc-ancien-gouverneur-du-haut-katanga-jc-kazembe-denonce-son-tour-lenrichissement-du>.

2 Cited in Young (1978), p. 172.

has served to lubricate the machinery of state and without which it might have ceased to function. Today, this logic persists—people often simply call it *Le Système*. In the system, the *gros legumes* ('big vegetables') are the people who are *incontournable* (unavoidable) to get things done, and getting things done depends on patronage. One's capital in the political marketplace is called a *carnet* (address book): 'The more money or connections economic operators have, the more likely they elicit compliance from others' (Kisangani 1998: 119). Patronage depends on and can be converted into other forms of wealth, principally violence and cash. Many are the indirect ways in which cash is solicited: *massage*, *tia ngai mbeli* (stab me), *rapport*, *kitu kidogo* (a little something), *ehemu yangu* (my part).

But over the past decade, along with the proliferation of armed groups, a more sinister vocabulary has spread in eastern Congo. *Lala Salama*, or 'sleep safely' is the Swahili term for illegal taxes that rebels and soldiers started levying at checkpoints over the past decade; it has its Kinyarwanda equivalent in *ndengera buzima*, or 'protect your life', a similar tax imposed by Hutu armed groups, and is called *mukongoro* among Nyanga rebels. Cash may also be elicited by use of guns by invoking 'support to security' (*appui à la sécurité*) or 'food for the troops' (*chakula ya jeshi*). The ascendance of the *effort de guerre*, as these exactions are collectively referred to, illustrates the fundamentally transactional nature that violence has become subject to. As we will discuss below, the mushrooming of ground-level terms related to rebel taxation—converting the threat of violence into cash—have everything to do with fundamental transformations in the structure of the political marketplace in eastern Congo: extreme territorial and political fragmentation leave a definitive imprint on the 'trans-scalar nature of power networks' in Congo (Carayannis et al 2018: 22).

A main argument of this paper will be that rather than looking for discrete actors along formal institutional lines, power in Congo is distributed through dynamic networks that straddle different political marketplaces and internal and external borders. Such networks are dominated by big men, who enter into temporal alliances with other big men, and are otherwise composed of clusters of proxies, clients, collaborators, and retainers. By examining these networks, the way they are formed, compete and collude, and around the exchange of what forms of value and resources they revolve, we can come to terms with the contours of Congo's highly fragmented political economy. The question then becomes is how these networks try to build their power and how they compete, which resources they mobilize, and eventually, how they come to shape politics at large.

To explore this question, this paper is structured as follows. The *following* section traces a history of the political marketplace in eastern Congo, highlighting how it emerged out of Mobutu's privatization of politics, and was progressively liberalized and infused with violence since the 1990s. Today, political order in the Congo is produced through bargaining in and among 'firms' composed of networks of power that straddle across civil and military, business and ethnic, as well as rebel and national boundaries. These networks operate at different levels

of society and mutually interact. The *next* section explores how they interact, that is, how bargaining takes place. It argues that Congo hasn't evolved as a single political marketplace, but is rather best understood as a complex amalgamation of relatively autonomous but nonetheless interlocking and embedded marketplaces. Whereas the national political scene centered on Kinshasa today forms one key marketplace, Eastern Congo is best approached as an embedded violent political marketplace which stretches across national borders and is in turn home to more localised nested markets. This section gives an overview of some of the top-down and bottom-up drivers of fragmentation in Eastern Congo, as a window into the dynamics of the political marketplace more generally. In each of these political markets, armed groups and violence play a different role, and we examine how these political markets relate through processes of multi-level bargaining. Through examples from Kasai and the Kivus, it shows how political budgets at one level are filled in one marketplace by manipulating dynamics in another. The fourth and *final* section explores the pertinence of the political marketplace approach by zooming in on the different roles of the Congolese army as a central force in Congo's violent political marketplace.

2. The historical evolution of Congo's political marketplace: from fragmentation to kleptocracy and back again?

This section gives a brief (pre)history of Congo's political marketplace, on the premise that an overview of critical junctures—or moments in which the political system pivots in a different direction—can help lay bare the 'market forces' that drive political continuity and change. While doing such a summary chronology invariably does violence to the complexity of history, it is nonetheless helpful to identify some basic patterns running through Congo's history. A first important takeaway from this historical overview will be that the analytical separation between politics and markets, between force, accumulation, and extraction that underpins most analysis is untenable. Across Congolese history, a constant is that wealth and power are a key function of patronage networks. This has deep historical roots, dating back at least to the crony capitalism of the colonial period but arguably even earlier. Nonetheless, Mobutu's Zaire laid the groundwork for the introduction of a political marketplace of violence and fear by consolidating his power through a carefully engineered patronage-based system, premised on the bartering of loyalty for cash. Second, against this continuity stands the change over time in the overall structure of the political field, from fragmentation to kleptocracy and—partially—back again to fragmentation as the political marketplace appeared in the 1990s. As we will see, this historical pattern is attributable to the vagaries of what De Waal calls political circuitry, or the infrastructure for convening and connecting networks of power. In Eastern Congo, after Belgian colonialism brutally claimed centralized control over violence, we are witnessing a long-term tendency for patron-client networks and the control of violence to devolve from the top of the political food chain to the bottom (cf. Moshanas 2018: 33). This devolution hit rock-bottom a few years ago, as local political entrepreneurs of different stripes

began to organise a political marketplace for violence apart from the dictates of Kinshasa's authority and interests, using violence and cash to settle local disputes and buy influence at varying scales.

From fragmentation to plunder

A meaningful history of Congo's political marketplace would start in precolonial times (Reid 2011), when the Congo Basin was home to a variety of regional systems. In general, around the vast equatorial rainforest relatively centralized polities existed, such as among the Lunda, Luba, Buganda and in Rwanda. But these polities were vastly outnumbered by the scattered clan-based communities of the forest, which had over centuries devised checks and balances to curb the build-up of worldly powers in any one center of power (Vansina 1990). Many of these communities were locked into turbulent regional power dynamics and would continually resort to limited warfare or alliance-building devices such as intermarriage or displacement to try and improve their relative positions. The exchange of goods in this regional space was embedded in moral economies which hardly followed market-logics. Chiefs were, for instance, expected to perpetually redistribute any goods obtained through tribute or other forms of authority-based appropriation.

The introduction of coastal long-distance trading and raiding networks in Central Africa (1830-1890) led to the emergence of new political dynamics along the trade routes, where violence could be converted into wealth, both modern and traditional (see Harms 1981 for the Congo River). When King Leopold II of Belgium began occupying the Congo Basin, he initially advanced along pre-existing ivory trade networks, overtaking strategic African points of control along the trade routes and pushing competing European and Zanzibari trading firms out of business (see Schouten 2021, 54ff). The Conference of Berlin in 1884-85 formalized his 'regulatory capture', shrouding his private colony in a veil of legitimacy. On the one hand, his Congo Free State (1870-1908) was a 'gatekeeper state' in that most of its revenues accrued from taxing exports of subcontracting or concessionary companies who had free license to deploy violence for labor coercion (Cooper 2002). On the other, as has been widely denounced, the Free State established a violent kleptocracy, where coercion was the key 'factor of production' by which resources and free (compulsory) labor were obtained (Northrup 1988: 41). Leopold II provided an incentive structure for individual agents through premiums to extract as much as possible on the shortest possible term, thus establishing a political-economic formation that can be characterised as a 'plunder economy' (*Raubwirtschaft*).³ On the local level, this coercive monopoly seemed to have resembled a 'franchise' model, in which 'the men on the spot' could operate in relatively autonomy from the center (Force Publique 1952).

³ Leopold II also made the Congo one of the world's first 'off shore' money-laundering centers. He used Congo-incorporated companies to quietly pursue business opportunities around the world: railway construction deals in China; fishing rights off Morocco; mines in Greece and the Philippines; and rubber concessions in Bolivia.

A period of market consolidation

Fiercely denounced at home and abroad, the Free State was taken over by Belgium in 1908. The discovery of vast deposits of minerals necessitated a more paternalistic and more administrative form of colonialism, economically centred on the extraction of mineral resources unevenly concentrated in Katanga, Kasai, the Kivus and Ituri through networks of companies that meshed with the colonial government based out of Brussels (1908-1960). While control obviously centred on the critical infrastructure of the colony, the build-up of a vast transport network meant that the Belgian colonial state's reach was exceptional towards the latter decades (Schouten 2013). The Belgian Congo drastically reduced local autonomy of its agents and built economies of scale in mining and agriculture. For this reason, Alex de Waal considers transport and communication infrastructure—elements of 'political circuitry'—a fundamental element in structures of power. As he puts it (2015), in colonial times, 'Control of the political circuitry could be achieved through the physical design of infrastructure such as roads and telephone lines. In colonial geography, the capital city and port were the hubs to which roads, railways, telegraph and post were connected.' Along the expanding infrastructure grids, the colonial administration linked customary authority to territory and rewarded taxation and loyalty and punished resistance by chieftains (Pongo 2001: 251, cf. Hoffmann 2019)—ending up with local chiefs who served colonial interests while also developing exceptional local powers, which is why Mamdani dubbed them 'decentralised despots' (1996, cf. Fairhead 1992).

If political independence in 1960 and five years of ensuing turmoil left much of the colonial infrastructure destroyed, it did little to upend the overall political circuitry, in that the political center which emerged in 1965 (Mobutu) was just as dependent on international technical experts and political support, and economically hinged on the same control over the hub and spokes that the Belgians left.⁴ However, Mobutu used these resources to buy domestic peace by establishing and maintaining patronage networks hinging on granting and threatening to cut off access to these sources of wealth. This logic was captured in the saying *le pouvoir se mange entier* (power is eaten whole), which entailed the neo-patrimonial idea that the father-chief *should* accumulate all riches, so that he may feed his 'children' (Schatzberg 2001: 40ff). In his study on Lisala, Schatzberg showed how individuals in the state's circuitry—such as civil servants—in turn approached their functions as 'blockage points', each level creaming off as much money as possible (Schatzberg 1979). In other words, while he retained the monopoly structure of control over mineral exports, Mobutu did establish an economy of loyalty (rather than merit) internal to his (single) political party and centered on the 'Office of the Presidency' rather than the government, as Gould and others have demonstrated in detail (see Gran et al 1979). In this way, Mobutu got underway an important process of marketization, introducing the elements of the commodification of power, including prebendalism, political bribery, etc., all of which made the political system in Zaire ripe for full marketization later.

⁴ Three-fourths of the country's money supply was concentrated in the capital (Schatzberg 1979: 162); for the predominance of foreign experts in the mining sector, cf. (Wolfe 1966).

Mobutu's initial cabinets comprised elites from all parts of the country. Yet, as the years advanced, the network that benefited from patronage became increasingly narrowed down to close associates who revolved between key economic, political and security posts. Mobutu's strategy of divide and rule consisted of frequent rotation of people in key positions to increase dependency through uncertainty and undercut the build-up of centers of power that could challenge him, for instance through the build-up of ethnic solidarities. In what Michael Schatzberg (1981: 463) called 'a game of patrimonial musical chairs', he kept on restructuring the political marketplace by creating new and parallel institutions, shifting people between posts, nationalising assets and redistributing them to cronies.⁵

Mobutu's Zaire was an archetypical 'rentier state' and Mobutu's style of rule is said to have stood model for the term 'kleptocracy', i.e., rule by corruption, or government theft (Gould 1980). Scholars have sought to explain how Mobutu was able to capitalize on the idea that an African chief had to usurp all power in order to gain respect and followers through the idea of neo-patrimonialism, which held that in Central African public culture only a chief who obtained control over the circulation of surplus could be expected to redistribute it to his clients. Ostentatious display of wealth and power à la Mobutu and Bokassa served as proof of the exorbitant political budget over which these political entrepreneurs presided. This pervasive form of political process has been analysed through the language of 'brokerage', 'patronage' or 'Bigmanity' (i.e., Bayart 2009, Schatzberg 2001, Tull & Mehler 2005). Sometimes explained with references all the way back to precolonial kinship logics of authority, such approaches commonly insist that the basic values underpinning such a system are not a commitment to competition in free markets or meritocracy, but rather relations of accumulation and redistribution in trust networks.

At the same time, Zaire's political economy was extremely internationalised. Mobutu smartly used the threat of communism or shifting the balance of power between international allies to access donor funds. He also used the copper proceeds to extend his patronage network internationally, funding a western network of powerful brokers of support for his regime, either through bribes or through mutually beneficial 'white elephants'—megaprojects that were vehicles to produce wealth for the presidency and international contractors by agreeing on liberating future public debt. At home, Mobutu presented mega-projects and grand infrastructure schemes as 'gifts' from the *bon père de famille* that put the population in his debt (De Villiers 2015: 12). Donors happily agreed to Mobutu's lavish lending and investments, as they made huge profits doing so (Schouten 2021: 96). Expertly playing domestic as well as foreign interests through the same rules of the game, Mobutu managed to survive in office in the face of crisis after crisis, amassing, and losing, legendary wealth along the way (Callaghy 1983).⁶

5 Leslie (1987: 70) observed, 'By frequently rotating government posts, Mobutu manages to maintain uncertainty and vulnerability'; or as Englebert and Mungongo note more specifically (2016: 25), 'Few politicians from the Mobutu era appear to have accrued lasting or at least visible wealth, as his system was predicated upon preventing potential contenders from accumulating resources'.

6 Young & Turner (1985, pp. 178–183) devote six pages to listing Mobutu's assets and wealth.

Market failure and restructuring

The 1970s-1980s were a critical juncture in that they saw the erosion of Mobutu's control over resources away from the center; in the debris of Mobutu's centralized system, multiple regional political marketplaces, each with their own dynamics and players, would begin to emerge. A turning point was arguably the global economic crisis in 1973 which led to a decline of copper prices and other primary commodity prices. Between 1988 and 1994, copper production decreased by 90%, drying up Mobutu's political budget and shrinking the marketplace to such an extent that it failed to meaningfully incorporate increasingly numerous margins. As Mobutu accepted the most radical package of structural adjustment in exchange for assent to stay in power, the formal state effectively withdrew from economic regulation and Mobutu explicitly urged Zairians to develop a distinctive entrepreneurial skill for survival in this alternative system, called *débrouillardise* (De Villers et al 2002). Moreover, he and his cronies took the forced privatization of parastatals and liberalization of mining, land, and other key sectors as opportunities to move key economic rents away from public scrutiny (cf. Hibou 2004). The drying up of patronage resources flowing through the center meant Mobutu had to rely increasingly on buying loyalty with decentralised self-financing opportunities associated to political and military office, for instance offering army officers the opportunity to deploy in thriving but unregulated economic hubs and cut their own deals with businessmen.

But as opportunities decentralised, political deal-making became increasingly localised, and the national political marketplace gradually fragmented as well. The combination of increasing disconnection from the center, an increasing reliance on avoidance of official rules and the 'unregulated economy' and political dissatisfaction fomented the emergence of tentative and smaller political marketplaces of patronage only marginally linked to the center (Callaghy 1984, Kisangani 1998, MacGaffey 1987). As Lemarchand put it, political mobilization throughout the country became very localized, leading to 'patronage networks ... with limited profundity and extension' (Lemarchand 1986: 63-64).

It is a truism that economic markets of any scale hinge on infrastructure; the same, of course, goes for political markets. The progressive dilapidation of the extended colonial transport network had vast repercussions for the kind of control that the political center could exercise over its peripheries (Pourtier 1993, Schouten 2013). In particular, much of the infrastructure that Zaire inherited from Belgian colonialism was eaten up by Mobutu's rent-seeking and mismanagement, with grave repercussions for the political circuitry, or the capacity to control the peripheries from the hub. Given the decreasing ratio of all-weather transport infrastructure to geographic space, administrative control and convening power from the center became patchy at best, and it became possible for local actors to forge relative autonomy out of the 'friction of distance' (Scott 2009). As the country's main transport arteries withered in the 1980s, Michael Schatzberg (2012: 119) observed, 'according to a very old pattern, when the central state's effective reach narrowed and withdrew from the hinterland, there arose in the

provinces a series of regional autonomies that took more and more effective power unto themselves'. In accepting the bargain of structural adjustment, Mobutu thus ultimately fed the forces that would eventually threaten his hold on power (Verweijen 2016: 18).⁷ Government agents, civilian and military, relied less and less on faltering and deflated government salaries and became involved in *de facto* privatised local provision of legal and protection 'services' (Raeymaekers 2014, Schouten 2011). The local state became a 'self-service' state, where local authorities relied on extortion to collect enough taxes to fund their own salaries (Englebert & Mungongo 2016; Young & Turner 1985: 97). Taxes on markets and along roads turned into unilateral and localized strategies of filling political budgets, allowing some of the local elites and army commanders to transform into local tyrants and proto-warlords (Fairhead 1992).

The early 1990s saw the acceleration of the centrifugal forces that were set in motion in the earlier decades. As in other countries, the end of the Cold War entailed a dramatic exogenous shock to the political marketplace that had carefully been crafted around an alliance of economic and geopolitical interests behind support for autocrats. After Western leaders withdrew their support, and with mining revenues having dwindled, Mobutu's Zaire was officially bankrupt and its leader left with a much reduced political budget, defaulting on his financing of loyalty even for the inner circle. Mobutu then became notorious for his divide and rule tactics even among his close associates. He trusted no one and could turn on his former aides, perhaps to compensate for his dwindling resources.

As the Zairian armed forces increasingly became predatory, protection became exceedingly commodified, leading to resistance on the part of those excluded in virtue of the price barrier, and to the formation of alternative markets of protection. Ethnic-based mutualities and political parties popped up as efforts to deal with the uncertainties engendered by the deregulation of violence and protection. These were logical attempts to re-embed them as 'club goods'⁸ in smaller networks based on kinship and common geographical background (Kisangani 1998), but the hardening of these networks intensified competition for land, national patronage, or other scarce resources. For instance, in the Kivus, Mobutu had privileged Banyarwanda elites who competed with other communities for control over ranches and access to political privilege (Tull 2003: 432; Mararo 2005). As other communities mobilized around their exclusion, the political marketplace became exceedingly infused with violence, as such trust networks but also local authorities and politicians resorted to mobilizing militias to settle conflicts around land, local authority and economic interest through force.⁹

The AFDL rebellion, which ignited the First Congo War (1996-1997), entailed a dramatic overhaul of the central networks of people who occupied the top positions in Congo's political marketplace—without however upturning the basic tenets of the system itself. In only seven

⁷ For parallels to elsewhere, see De Waal (2015), section 'a near-perfect political marketplace', where the absence of infrastructure and remoteness are preconditions for political bargaining.

⁸ Sub-type of public goods, from which people can be excluded.

⁹ For an example of the the complicated dynamics this spun into motion, see Sungura et al (2020).

months, a network of Uganda and Rwanda-backed Eastern Congolese ('swahiliphones') toppled the Mobutu's regime.¹⁰ As the political marketplace under Mobutu had excluded the '99 percent', most Congolese were willing to bet on the possibility that this rebellion could lead to better government. Yet the AFDL was formed by the system. During the AFDL's campaign, Laurent Kabila, the movement's Congolese figurehead, increased financing for the attack on the capital by selling diamond concessions they occupied on the way. He obtained USD 20 million in cash from the Israeli businessman Dan Gertler in exchange for a near-monopoly on Kasai's diamonds (Abadie 2011). One of the first things he did after he had occupied Kinshasa was to start a private trust called Comiex-Congo, which was intended as a vehicle for 'asset transfer', to siphon wealth from state assets, via private companies, to private accounts and to use these funds to attempt to increase his power by proposing to refund these allies for their participation in the war, to increase his legitimacy as a relative outsider (CRG 2017: 7, Willame 1998). However, his former patrons in Rwanda and Uganda weren't keen on releasing their controlling stakes in his government, and responded by launching another proxy rebellion in 1998, the RCD, sparking the Second Congo War (1998-2003).

From war economy to multi-level extractivism

The Second Congo War entailed a transition from centralized kleptocracy towards, if not a free market for coercion, at least a radical fragmentation and generalisation of coercion-driven economics—what has been called a 'war economy' (Nest et al 2006) or 'warlord politics' (Reno 1998). Many of the armed entrepreneurs involved banked in on the profitable forward linkages associated to armed mobilization, branching out from looting into more systematic taxation and other forms of profit making. Coinciding with a global upsurge of mineral prices, everyone in the war resorted to military occupation of concessions, production sites, transport routes and taxation points, and at points different armed groups sold the same mineral licenses as 'booty futures'¹¹ to different investors.

As a result of this loosening of capital controls in the market for force, Congo turned into a patchwork of different, partially interlinking, political marketplaces, in which neighbouring countries supported different networks of government/rebel proxies inside the country. Military actors of all stripes—foreign as well as domestic—displaced civilian authorities as the locus of authority in politics and the economy. The 'dirty bargain' of this period—elaborated upon by Mary Kaldor—was that war was more profitable than peace for the elites involved, both national and regional (Raeymaekers 2013: 601; Kaldor 2013).

Illustrating the period's 'military commercialism', Rwanda had set up a 'Congo Desk' to oversee the linkages between business and conflict in Congo, and President Kagame

¹⁰ This invasion followed a loosening of capital controls in eastern Congo's market for force. If Eastern Congo had during the previous decades already become oriented towards informal cross border trade with neighbouring Rwanda, Uganda and Burundi, the genocide in Rwanda poured new actors into Eastern Congo's marketplace in the shape of Hutu militias.

¹¹ 'exploitation rights to natural resources that they hope to capture in battle' (<https://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/polisci/faculty/ross/papers/working/bootyfutures.pdf>).

of Rwanda is thought to have said that Rwanda's involvement in the war ought to be 'self-financing'; and through the dealings of Salim Saleh, President Museveni's younger brother and military advisor, the gold of the old Orientale Province at one point accounted 12% of Uganda's GDP (ibid: 606). In contrast to Rwanda's centralized involvement, Uganda's involvement in illegal cross-border trade in Ituri was much more decentralized and reliant on individual commanders. Overseen by regional capitals, the military-commercial networks in eastern Congo could be likened to integrated conglomerates, as they spanned borders and combined the protection of business conduct with collaboration with the main agents in interlocking economic sectors. Raeymaekers (2013: 602) for instance documents how the Butembo business community itself started to raise cash to pay for, and extend more and more influence on, armed groups from the same Nande community. The coordination and integration of transport, marketing and protection gave rise to profitable economies of scale organized by such syndicates, reducing transaction costs.

In 2003, the main belligerents brokered a peace deal (Sun City, South Africa), in which they promised they would transform into political parties and integrate their soldiers into a unified army, institutionalising a collusive oligopoly. Former belligerents attempted to arrive at a donor-backed 'payroll peace' in which power positions would be converted into government positions and salaries. However, in the negotiations over the composition of the transitional government and positions in the army, the capacity to effectively wield violence became a prized currency, entrenching a pattern that would outlast the transition (Tull & Mehler 2005). To deploy an economic metaphor, increased government spending on armed groups had a 'crowding in' effect, whereby higher political payoffs encouraged armed groups to invest in what De Waal (2015) calls 'rent-seeking rebellion', because they could see the looming profits of negotiation over integration.

Valuation of armed groups was based on their effective capacities to wield violence, sparking not only a wave of violence as a form of 'signalling' one's worth in the negotiation process over profitable conditions of integration, but also involving the creation of start-ups only in response to the possibility for integration (and the packages that go with it). Furthermore, many armed group commanders artificially inflated their value. Small-time entrepreneurs started calling themselves 'generals' in the bush to try and attempt integration with that rank in the army, arrived for integration with 'ghost soldiers', or inflated their *cahier de charges* (list of demands) on purpose, making impossible demands in order to hedge for future retraction from the negotiation process (Verweijen & Iguma 2016). For many individuals, reintegration and *récyclage* turned into a 'gig economy'. A particular successful strategy in this temporary 'political marketplace of integration' was to resist integration and wreak havoc to try and obtain higher positions in the army or other kinds of benefits. Particularly in the east, this in turn provided a 'market incentive' for new armed groups to form and use violence to signal their market value in the political economy of integration, with a view of trying and obtaining

army ranks, and for integrated units to retain connections to armed groups, just in case (Baaz & Verweijen 2013).¹² However, the majority of government positions were given to the armed groups that could pose a threat in virtue of their connections and foreign backing, to the detriment of smaller armed groups like the Mai Mai who were sidelined, co-opted, or bought off (Stearns 2013b). Elites in Kinshasa managed to defuse the threat of large armed groups by integrating them at the price of weakening the army—which also makes it easier to control and defuse as a political force (CRG 2020: 45).

At the same time, on the national level, donor pressure to hold elections in 2006 put pressure on political entrepreneurs to maximize their budgets at the expense of mining reform, pro-poor spending or structural reforms (Moshonas 2013). Even as the country formally transitioned to multi-party democracy, contacts to armed groups remained an important bargaining chip to retain relevance in the presidential network. While Kabila aimed to centralize power around the presidency, his party PPRD and the opposition party UPDS only held a fifth of parliament, forcing Kabila into a broad and therefore costly ruling coalition, the presidential majority. This majority operated under a very short time horizon with high pressure to distribute rents (Marysse & Tshimanga 2014: 135; Englebert & Tull 2013: 15-16). Indeed, it might fairly be argued that while of course loyalty remained a main currency in Kabila's patrimonial network, the national political marketplace of the transition period has also been a form of a 'gatekeeper state' in which gatekeepers were those who had leverage over armed groups managed to gain privileges and power inside the presidential patronage network (Verweijen 2016: 26-7).

Yet, the failure to form an integrated army out of the Sun City agreement meant the Congolese government had gained little coercive capacity out of it vis-à-vis remaining armed groups. While most rebel groups in Eastern Congo posed little threat, the CNDP—emerging like a sphynx out of the ashes of RCD-Goma—formed an exception. Kabila tried to bargain the CNDP out of the marketplace by offering integration in 2006 and, when that failed, reintegration in 2008, but CNDP maintained separate chains of command and revenue generation, and conducted operations autonomous from the FARDC hierarchy. A number of Mai Mai leaders excluded from Sun-City managed to mobilize jointly in an alliance called PARECO to balance against the common threat of the CNDP (Stearns 2013a). The government aimed to reduce the CNDP's power by integrating it together with numerous other militia into the FARDC during the 2008 Goma Peace Conference. To diffuse the CNDP, the idea was to not integrate armed groups wholesale but rather militias on individual basis, mixing them afterwards. However, this strategy basically invited start-ups in the 'marketplace for integration': political entrepreneurs quickly mobilized new or defunct armed groups in a bid for access to handsome demobilization perks (Vlassenroot & Raeymaekers 2009).

¹² In the ensuing integration, many of the regional power networks did everything to retain their autonomy, by either refusing to integrate their troops or by keeping separate chains of command despite formal integration.

While these tendencies played out in relation to Kinshasa, it cannot be said that power is traded in a single marketplace, particularly because the transition led to a deregulation and decentralization of the political circuitry in eastern Congo (cf. Hesselbein 2011: 12). The capacity to wield violence became a prized form of capital and the barriers to entry to recognition were low. Smaller-scale armed groups began using the threat and use of violence to meddle with the appointment of traditional and administrative local authorities, forming rackets on local commerce. The far-reaching militarisation of politics also engendered a militarisation of society, as communities, businessmen or public authorities who didn't have links to armed networks felt threatened by competitors who did (Vogel 2014; Verweijen & Iguma 2016). As Beneduce *et al* observed at the time (2006), a host of second-tier networks spawned by the alliances of the Second Congo War persisted and fractured along different lines, evolving into parallel governance complexes that promised to provide some measure of stable profit, power and protection in a situation of 'neither-peace-nor-war' that has kept dragging on. Illustrating the lengths to which armed groups went to compete for clients, the *Forces démocratiques de libération du Rwanda* (FDLR), in 2005 set up the equivalent of a CSR campaign *avant la lettre* through their dedicated unit *La Vie*, which was responsible for 'community outreach' and 'awareness' of their taxation and involvement in the governance of the local economy (UN 2017). Yet few of these rackets proved stable. Many armed groups split apart as a result of individual political bargaining by leaders, and repeated military operations succeeded in removing some of the larger armed groups from the marketplace as significant political forces. But on the ground, the aftermath of such operations was often simply the resurgence of new, if smaller, armed groups out of the scattered remnants of the larger ones (Verweijen 2016).

Ongoing political bargaining

The current political moment has all the trappings of another critical juncture. The 2018 elections turned out a masterful political bargain engineered by Kabila.¹³ Whereas Kabila's CACH had announced a different candidate, Emmanuel Shadary, it became clear that he received so little votes compared to the FFC candidate Martin Fayulu of the Lamuka coalition, that a different solution was brokered. The new president, Tshisekedi, was a compromise struck so that Kabila could engineer a collusive oligopoly (keep Lamuka out) but there is a real struggle going on for effective power, or what Tshisekedi's father called *l'Imperium*.

To understand the current political moment, it is necessary to appreciate how Kabila had engineered the political marketplace in the years before. Mineral prices plummeted after 2013, dealing a heavy blow to state revenues and the capacity to feed patronage networks, yet Kabila savvily entrenched his network's control of the nation's wealth by diversifying investments, taking up shares in very diverse sectors of the economy, large and small, political and economic. It concerned as much control over lucrative taxation posts as participation

13 <http://www.rfi.fr/fr/afrique/20190311-comment-tshisekedi-est-devenu-president-congo-12-revanche-etienne>.

in at least 80 business firms operating in all possible economic sectors (CRG 2017, cf. Raeymaekers 2012). Like under Mobutu, Kabila's reign was essentially an oligarchy: access to the most important flows of resources—political or economic—passed through the presidential network and depended on allegiance to his party, the PPRD; like the Mobutu era, many of the private assets of the network were protected by the Pretorian Guard. Kabila expended a lot of effort to funnel potential governmental resources into his political budget, to purchase loyalty and influence. Kabila's network was just as internationalised as Mobutu's, hinging crucially on brokers such as Dan Gertler and other foreign intermediaries who could turn government contracts for anything from military training, passports, mining and construction concessions into sources of fungible dollar wealth that could be put to work in the constant bargaining for cooptation of the many regional elites that make up Congo's highly pluralistic national political scene (Englebert et al 2018; CRG 2017). For many years, Kabila relied on a cabal comprising Augustin Katumba Mwanke, a secretive *éminence grise*, to broker deals nationally and internationally, often jointly with Dan Gertler, to develop mining concessions into fungible cash flows. The Congolese government would sell prospecting concessions to Gertler's Fleurette Group at bargain prices, which he'd then resell at competitive prices to international mining firms, providing kickbacks to Kabila in the process (Marriage 2018).

Tshisekedi is progressively trying to wrest Kabila's influence in parliament, and control over the most important positions in the army and around the key economic sectors—cobalt and copper in Katanga and along key import and export routes and sectors.¹⁴ Indeed, many Congolese still call Kabila *Rai's*, or 'chief' in Swahili. Yet, a weakness of the system left behind by the incumbent, is the very nature of the system. First, all big figures (*gros legumes*) in key positions are involved in profitable but widely known illegal activities (Verweijen 2016: 36). This is in fact the key to the system. Tshisekedi can increase his power and reduce that of the Kabila network—and at the same time score with the international community—by trying to use the formal system against the informal power holders—a function previously merged in the figure of the president. Arrest warrants and denouncement of corruption of individual businessmen, politicians, and army figures show that Tshisekedi is attempting to disrupt this network, or at least negotiate an increase in political budget for himself. This was applied to Albert Yuma, a Kabila loyalist and head of Gécamines as well as the powerful Federation of Congolese enterprises, who was accused of diverting USD 200 million, as well as Tshisekedi's former ally Vital Kamerhe, who has a strong power-base in South Kivu.¹⁵

Second, as cash is a key currency in Congo's political marketplace, both Tshisekedi and Kabila jostle for influence through equal measure threat and cash disbursements to buy political loyalty. As one MP of Congo's lower house commented in November 2020: 'We MPs are disillusioned by an evil that has taken root in our Chamber. Here I'd like to denounce

¹⁴ It was agreed that Mr Tshisekedi could rule as long as his predecessor controlled a two-thirds majority in parliament. (Conveniently, the president can be impeached by a vote of two-thirds of MPs, allowing Mr Kabila's party to oust him at any time.)

¹⁵ See <https://www.theafricareport.com/22853/drc-influential-gecamines-boss-albert-yuma-caught-between-kabila-and-tshisekedi/>.

corruption. Last week, many of our colleagues have been ... approached by *inciviques* who proposed them an amount ... of 7.000 USD in exchange for a signature to depose the office of our house.¹⁶ As Tshisekedi disposes over both carrots and the stick of the legal capacity to dismiss politicians, he is gaining the upper hand, turning former Kabilists in key institutions into members of his Union Sacrée.

Tshisekedi is also betting heavily on counterbalancing Kabila's deeply entrenched domestic influence and financial assets across the country by leveraging western support and obtaining international legitimacy. Since Thisekedi became president, the state-owned mining companies SOKIMO and MIBA have been selling off concessions through old-time international mining brokers such as Klaus Eckhoff. As these brokers and the directors of these parastatals are part of Kabila's network, but the deals are signed off by the President, it isn't immediately clear whether these deals are Kabila's attempts to test if he still has the political budget to generate cash flows—or whether Thishekeki is entrenching his own network in the 'real economy' of Congo, in search of the liquidity necessary to finance *l'Imperium*. In any case, these—unlawful—deals received the opprobrium of mining companies involved in these concessions as well as the IMF and Congolese NGO's.¹⁷

3. Market forces: fragmentation & network effects

As above chronology already showed, Congo's national political marketplace has historically been subject to both centripetal and centrifugal forces. On the one hand, since colonial times, rulers in the center have aspired to monopolize the national political marketplace and control the interface with outside clients, and with state failure figuring prominently on the international security agenda, it should come as no surprise that Congo has been subjected to ambitious programs aimed at overcoming political fragmentation, re-establishing state authority and the administrative control of the center through costly infrastructure and capacity building programs (De Vries 2015).

Yet on the other hand, as a counterpoint to these centripetal forces, it is also possible to identify a consistent historical drive towards fragmentation in Congo, ranging from precolonial institutions designed to curb the buildup of centralized power in any one chief to the conscious divide-and-rule tactics that Mobutu deployed to prevent possible contenders from building up too much autonomous power, to the current-day fragmentation of the political marketplace for force. These tendencies are, of course, amplified by a progressive divestment from maintenance of peripheral transport networks and the effects of decades of conflict on physical and political circuitry (Pourtier 2009). In part because of the fragmentation of the armed group landscape, active intervention has given way to a politics of *laissez-faire*

16 https://twitter.com/wembi_steve/status/1326082725237956608.

17 See the contracts here: <https://www.mines-rdc.cd/resourcecontracts/search/group> For scrutiny by the IMF, see <https://www.africain-telligence.com/mining-sector/2020/09/21/nrgi-carter-center-to-help-kinshasa-meet-imf-mining-transparency-demands,109607717-ar1>, for Barrick's response, see [https://s25.q4cdn.com/322814910/files/doc_news/2020/02/20/\(French\)-Barrick-Will-Not-Approve-Mooted-Sale-of-SOKIMO's-Stake-in-Kibali.pdf](https://s25.q4cdn.com/322814910/files/doc_news/2020/02/20/(French)-Barrick-Will-Not-Approve-Mooted-Sale-of-SOKIMO's-Stake-in-Kibali.pdf).

from Kinshasa to militarization in east. The political center has little incentive to demobilize or retain direct leverage over armed groups, unless they control strategic resources. From this results one of the most remarkable distinguishing features of Congo's contemporary political marketplace: the presence of well over 130 armed groups, mostly concentrated in the country's eastern provinces (Stearns & Vogel 2017).

The PMF would approach violent political marketplaces with so many players as a system characterised by 'free competition'. Yet instead of a level playing field, power in Congo is distributed through dynamic networks that straddle different political marketplaces and internal and external borders. Such networks are dominated by big men, who enter into temporal alliances with other big men, and are otherwise composed of clusters of proxies, clients, collaborators, and retainers. By examining these networks, the way they are formed, compete and collude, and what forms of value or resources they revolve around, we can come to terms with the contours of Congo's highly fragmented politics.

A first implication is that transactional politics should be analysed as relational (Carayannis et al 2018: 5, cf. Cramer 2002: 1850). Thus, the objective of political bargaining might both be to increase individual power or wealth and to advance the position of a network vis-a-vis a competing one, revolving around exclusion from the provision of club goods. The 'subject' in these orders are both individuals and networks of power, which range from families, clans, allies, etc. In a fragmented socio-political landscape, accumulating wealth is coveted by competitors, and is thus political; absent the institutionalisation of trust in formal institutions, it will need to be lodged in networks of trust (Raeymaekers 2012) and 'secured' and backed up by the possibility to wield coercion. Trust networks tend to vertically integrate as they branch out into different types of services and activities coveted by their members, indicating their functional adaptability (cf. Huntington 1968: 15).

Currently, myriad locally embedded parallel networks exist, each with their point of weight in a different area of Congo. Kabila's power network is heavily centred on Katanga but extends vertically and horizontally across sectors that it obstructs the control Thisheledi is trying to position his own, Kasai based, network into key government positions. In eastern Congo, myriad networks exist which are less directly connected to national politics. In North Kivu, for instance, there is the RCD/K-ML network that was born out of a bargain during the Second Congo War between militias and business elites in *Le Grand Nord* and continues to hold key civil and military positions, while *Le Petit Nord* is home to another second-tier network emerging during the Second Congo War, of the Banyarwanda elites that ran RCD-G, then CNDP (2009), and later M23 (2012), and who control a disproportionate share of military commander positions. The latter seem to be dominant players in relatively autonomous, but nonetheless overlapping political marketplaces, in which smaller such networks—such as Hutu elites in Rutshuru and Masisi—may attempt to recur to local and outside alliances to balance against them.

This can be illustrated, for instance, in the contestation around eastern Congo's largest coltan mine in Rubaya, North Kivu. On the surface, it seems like a relatively straightforward conflict between an artisanal mining cooperative called COOPERAMMA and the concession holder SMB. However, is just the surface of a complex, deeply layered conflict pitting Hutu and Tutsi networks of power over profit, regional influence and claims to land. The majority of artisanal miners organized in the cooperative is from the Hutu community and steered by the Hutu elite figure Sengimani, but SMB is owned by a Tutsi called Ben Mwangachuchu. Both have ties with politico-military networks—the artisanal miners with the Nyatura rebel group and the concession holder with networks integrated into the government from the CNDP. Short of violent armed confrontation, bargaining in this local political marketplace involves frequent mutual recriminations, small flare-ups of violence, deals with shady foreign traders, playing off foreign supply chain transparency initiatives against each other, as well as jostling for relations with Kigali, which can allow or disallow smuggling schemes to the benefit and detriment of these networks.

Thus, eastern Congo's marketplace is best analysed as a regional political marketplace, but one nested and embedded in a national political marketplace as well as in a regional one, and itself contains multiple local sub-markets (cf. De Vries 2015: 21). Fragmentation also means a higher variety and confluence of factors that drive conflict: dynamics from one place to the next can be radically different: it might be that a relatively stable political bargain is in place in one area, but that a nearby area is subject to instability in dynamics which seem to obey their own marketplace logic.

Traffic d'influence: multi-level bargaining

Under such structural conditions, the exercise of power at a distance by necessity takes shape as bargaining with brokers or intermediaries. This is a system that creates room for maneuver for both the dominant and the subordinated, as both can instrumentalise the bargaining space resulting from intractability (Chabal & Daloz 1999). However, patronage and loyalty are rented, never bought. From the perspective of those higher up the political food chain, it is possible to hedge against risk by holding diversified portfolios, retaining open political channels to competing suppliers in lower levels of the supply chain (cf Jené & Englebert 2019).

The same goes for political entrepreneurs in subordinate positions in such networks. As Eric Hobsbawm surmised for 19th century bandits, it makes as much sense to be 'loyal' to one political patron as it is for a subsistence farmer to rely on a single crop (1969). Indeed, the shapeshifting, fickle alliances and unstable loyalties of many armed groups might seem like an expression of weakness from the center of power, but are an expression of 'firm' strategies to hedge their bets and maximize the gains of forum-shopping in political patronage, and a counterpart to the patrons' strategy of vesting wealth and political capital in networks. Recent

events around Kitchanga can serve to illustrate. Traditionally a stronghold of Hutu and Hunde militia, the area was overrun by the NDC-R rebel movement of Guidon in 2018. NDC-R operated as a partial proxy for the Congolese army, which was interested in routing the Hutu-affiliated FDLR groups. Faced with a powerful enemy, many smaller Mai Mai factions were (temporarily) integrated into the NDC-R, ensuring their survival. As a clear sign of how bargains trump self-professed political agendas, the NDC-R also allied with one FDLR faction in its ambition to defeat another, whereas it had initially sold itself as mobilizing against all 'foreign' armed groups (CRG 2020). This example certainly doesn't stand on its own. Arsène Bwenge already observed in 2003 the contradiction between the claim that Mai Mai groups were 'popular self-defense forces' and the alliances they entered into with their supposed enemies could be explained by reference to their motivation to share in 'political rents' (2003: 86-7). This seems to confirm that, as De Waal has argued, while drawing on moral populism seems to challenge the political marketplace, such claims often end up subservient to negotiations for incorporation into the marketplace.

If Congo is a set of interlocking and nested marketplaces, political acts within a marketplace at one analytical level might not make sense without knowing the stakes playing out in another. Instead, the trans-scalar nature of power networks warrants attention to the way in which political entrepreneurs pursue interests in one field of activities or political marketplace through bargaining in others. Congolese have given the straddling between different political marketplaces and juggling of different sources of power a name: *traffic d'influence* (influence peddling, cf. Carayannis et al 2018: 22).¹⁸ In the most straightforward way, this boils down to, as Ezimet Kisangani put it, 'friendship with public officials'—or what one of my interlocutors called 'technical know-who'—'is a necessary condition for capital accumulation' (1998: 127). Or, as Judith Verweijen (2016:45) has further elaborated, 'not being able to draw on the leverage and protection armed actors can bring often leads to difficulties in business, increased levels of harassment by state agents and greater risks of being attacked. It also yields comparative advantages to personal and political competitors and opponents who are able to mobilize force.' Therefore, any durable business activity requires a *parapluie*, a political umbrella figure able to fall back on in case of trouble.

A first example of how *traffic d'influence* often straddles marketplaces across different scales, one transport company in North Kivu has captured a disproportionate share of the local transport business by inviting a member of the Kabila family as a shareholder, thereby being able to circumvent the panoply of taxes demanded by local and regional authorities, gaining a significant market advantage (Schouten, Murairi, Kubuya 2017).

¹⁸ Mobutu savvily manipulated foreign powers as part of an integrated 'patrimonial' political marketplace (Schatzberg 1989), and even today, manipulating external support is crucial in balancing local agendas. Whereas Africanists have called this structural outward-lookingness 'extraversion' (Bayart 2000)—i.e., the creative manipulation of dependency—comparative politics have approached it from an agent-perspective, looking at how political actors bargain and balance 'games' in different political arenas at the same time (Putnam 1988).

Vice versa, political entrepreneurs can also increase their political budget in the national marketplace by meddling in local, seemingly disconnected, marketplaces. A good example of this type of multi-level bargaining is *dédoublement* in Kasai. *Dédoublement* means a splitting or doubling of power to bypass existing channels of influence. The former President of the National Assembly and then Minister of Interior, Évariste Boshab, attempted to use the Kasai crisis to increase his political budget in Kinshasa. Kasai is a traditional opposition stronghold, and in the run-up to the elections planned for 2016, Boshab—who is from Kasai—began replacing numerous customary chiefs in Kasai with appointees loyal to him, which he could then use to bargain for increasing standing with Kabila. As the Kamuina Nsapu violence erupted, another Kasaien in Kinshasa saw the opportunity to use the conflict to his advantage. Make Mwangu, the biggest Congolese politician from the Pende, envisioned becoming *incontournable* in Kinshasa by taking over Boshab's political budget derived from brokering Kasai influence. Mwangu allegedly fuelled the Bana Mura counter-mobilization against Kamuina Nsapu specifically with this in mind. The Bana Mura militias are majoritarily Chokwe and Pende, and for their part, they used the opportunity to dislodge the Luba from their profitable roles in brokering the diamond trade.¹⁹

Along the same lines, power networks in the Kivus have in the past resorted to mobilizing militia not to challenge the political order but instead to bargain for access into the patronage network of Kabila (Cayannaris et al 2018). Local disruptions to the operations of a mining company associated to the regime can thus not be a 'local' political act but rather meant to advance a *dossier* on the national level. Or consider the recent example whereby MONUSCO found its supplies blocked at the DRC border; after the Beni office of the mission resumed logistical support to certain generals—suspended because these were thought to use operations to increase their hold over the teak trade—was the train of trucks miraculously released by the Congolese customs authorities.²⁰ It should come as no surprise that Congolese are prone to consider that everything is manipulated, and to try and conjure a reasonable explanation of the forces and interests that might operate on other levels lurking behind local events—violent events, political events, everyday events—that would otherwise seem random.

Patronage networks embed outside forces into the marketplace

As indicated earlier, studies of patronage in Congo commonly insist that the basic values underpinning such a system are not a commitment to competition in free markets or meritocracy, but rather relations of accumulation and redistribution in trust networks, which cut across public/private, formal/informal, civil/military, licit/illegal and geographical boundaries. These norms should be analysed as shaped in response to the historical experience with the real shape of the state, a source and an effect of the oppressiveness or failure of state institutions to effectively guarantee other forms of representation, free exchange and merit-

¹⁹ This account comes from (CRG 2018) and discussions at the 2020 workshop.

²⁰ Source: interviews with UN source, Beni, 2018.

based social mobility. As a result, what from the outside might resemble simple and pure bad, ineffective governance, might in effect constitute meaningful forms of adaptation by a such a trust network to maintain the status quo in the face of reform efforts that threaten carefully crafted but fragile distributions of wealth and power (cf. Peiffer & Englebert 2012).²¹ Brokers in such 'extraverted' networks will try as good and bad as they can to subvert external interventions and embed them into their own networks (cf. Bayart 2000).

For instance, as part of state-building reforms in the 2010s, the EU, IOM and other organisations engaged in technical assistance to improve the payment systems of the Congolese police and armed forces. EUSEC attempted to 'bankarize' the payment of soldiers, to eliminate the possibility for commanders to appropriate soldier's pay; IOM engaged in a countrywide census of the Congolese police forces to eliminate the many phantom agents on the police force for which commanders pocketed pay. In both cases, this threatened to subvert carefully crafted and highly political networks of patronage and power which exactly worked through the allocation by other means of these funds. Indeed, withholding salary is a key premise of a widespread pyramid scheme in the Congolese security services whereby by commanders could incentivise subordinates to 'feed the horse' (Baaz & Olsson 2011), and the EUSEC's baseline census uncovered no less than 70.000 phantom soldiers on the army's payroll, over one third of all paid soldiers.²² Thus, it shouldn't come as a surprise that the EUSEC effort floundered and the IOM census was never finished, because of forms of sabotage, active and passive, that went up the entire food chain (Mandrup 2018: 119, cf. De Vries 2015). What these examples illustrate is that there are, perhaps counterintuitively, incentives from the political center to subvert changes to the political circuitry that entail the extension of its formal administrative control, and instead to maintain the fragmentation of governance from a Weberian perspective; as Moshanas concludes an excellent study on the topic, 'administrative weakness, rather than being the outcome of a country suffering from poor governance and low capacity, can be carefully cultivated' (2018: 35).

Another example is the sophisticated and subtle way in which Congolese elites manage to completely subvert efforts to render the country's main export-earnings sector, the extractive industries, more 'transparent'. Whereas many studies exist which explore the behavior of multinational corporations in Congo, they presuppose these companies exist as powerful, discrete entities. Nothing could be less true. In fact, foreign mining companies are often completely entangled in a spiders' web of competing trust networks that manage to straddle the formal and informal to embed the flow of resulting profits. It is well-known how Kabila would have the Mining Ministry sell concessions on the cheap to shell companies jointly

21 As Leslie already noted for Mobutu's regime, 'what is considered to be simply bureaucratic disorganization and economic mismanagement by external actors such as the [World] Bank and the IMF, is to Zaire's ruling elite a rational policy of 'organized disorganization' designed to maintain the status quo' (1987, p. 6).

22 <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library/Case-Studies/Chain-of-payments-project-within-the-Armed-Forces-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-Congo-FARDC>. Of course, such efforts are without history: in the late 1960s, as Gould (1979: 96-7) reports, donors supported the computerization of civil servant salarizing in Zaire in the 1960s to facilitate transparency and weed out corruption, only to introduce new opportunities for corruption at each technical step now introduced.

owned between his family and Dan Gertler, who would then resell the mining licenses at market rate to those major internationals willing to pay kickbacks (Marriage 2018, cf. Titeca & Edmond 2019).

But the control and influence of patronage networks goes much further. Contemporary industrial mining consists of a series of outsourced tasks and subcontracts which are theoretically assigned through meritocratic tenders. In practice, the winning bids for these tenders are those by companies owned by influential Congolese or regional political-military entrepreneurs. Take the case of Kibali Gold, the largest operational industrial gold mine in Congo. In 2016, fuel for the massive generators was supplied by one of Kabila's firms, while contract workers were supplied by *Etablissement Mudogo Didi* (MD) owned by Moise Katumbi, and the handsome private security contract was won by Universal Security owned by Aubain Minaku, then president of the national assembly, who put moonlighting soldiers and police agents in private security uniforms (Schouten 2014).²³ To whom these tenders go is often a result of political bargaining and reflection of a deal cut in the national political marketplace. Finally, Kibali engages in occasional payments to companies owned by provincial political authorities, ostensibly for road works, but which never materialize.²⁴ Without granting these profitable tenders to companies owned by the 'right' people, international mining companies would quickly lose their 'political license to operate' and find their mining license up for renegotiation. On the local level, Kibali Mining obtains its 'social license to operate' by putting local political and customary authorities on the payroll, to quell widespread resistance by displaced local populations and hires the local army unit to provide additional static protection (Pax & CERN 2015). In this way, foreign companies operating in Congo are not somehow outside, but achieve their 'formal' exports only by being firmly embedded in, the influence networks that make up the fabric of Congo's political marketplace (Schouten 2017).

Other examples can illustrate the market incentives that exist to subvert efforts to increase formal governance. In the 2010s, donor pressures to reform the artisanal mining sector included the requirement that artisanal miners be organised in cooperatives. However, many of the local elites who had brokered artisanal mining hitherto weren't about to relinquish the profitable bottleneck positions they had carefully crafted. Instead, they transformed their broker positions into official cooperatives on paper, thus sanctioning their *de facto* control over the distribution of profits along mineral supply chains (cf. Geenen & Cuvelier 2019).

Even seemingly innocuous outside development interventions become subject to play in Congo's political marketplace. Trust networks thus manoeuvre strategically to position themselves at bottlenecks to manipulate donor projects so that they extend their own power and capture portions of aid and development budgets. Road rehabilitation projects are for

²³ Private security contracts are often a formal reflection of the informal protection that multinationals purchase from Congolese Big Men, and an important financial resource for the latter, making up over 50% of the local service contracts that Congolese firms can get from multinational firms (FEC 2014).

²⁴ <https://cas-info.ca/2020/05/haut-uele-le-gouverneur-et-le-president-de-lassemblee-provinciale-poursuivis-pour-detournement-de-fonds-publics/>.

instance subject to intense political pressures at all levels, as political entrepreneurs attempt to manipulate the decision of which road to fix, in order to obtain advantages in local political marketplaces. It should not come as a surprise that many roads opened up under international stabilization efforts by chance lead to the home village of important political figures, and that armed groups conversely have either resisted or co-opted road projects, by forcing through kidnappings that their people be put on the payroll for local manual labor. Such projects are highly political as resources that have value as expression of influence—if these programs are not captured *de facto*, they will nonetheless be claimed by political leaders. From this perspective, the selection criteria on which aid is disbursed to ‘populations in need’ envisioned in aid allocation is highly disruptive of the established order, subversive even to carefully crafted power positions.

All these examples serve to illustrate not just the extent to which the Congolese political marketplace revolves around trans-scalar power networks that attempt to bend and distort formal governance and licit economic sectors, but also to consider the deeply engrained moral economy underpinning it as a key driving force shaping behaviour and rewards in the market. Whereas it is easy to set aside such behaviour as mere venality, a thorough understanding of the Congolese political marketplace would explore how they constitute a kind of Polanyian ‘double movement’, in the sense of efforts to ‘domesticate’ the liberal values embedded in external interventions, which threaten to subvert a social fabric instead premised on ‘redistribution of wealth through services, gifts, and performances of collective contestation or celebration’ (Cayannaris et al 2018: 23, cf. De Boeck 1998). Thus, it could be said that questions of moral economy both enable and constrain the marketization of the social and political spheres/arenas. Moral economy enables the political market by providing a set of norms and a vernacular that allow customary reciprocities to be commodified and monetized, but by that very enabling it also puts implicit moral limits on how far that commodification can ‘legitimately’ go. And then there’s a contest over political elites’ attempts to transgress those limits. Sometimes the elites win, sometimes they don’t.

Market instabilities

What makes the marketplace for violence so dynamic is the very fickleness of armed groups’ ties to local populations, wealthy or powerful patrons, and the state. Just like Hobsbawm’s bandits (1969: 87-8), armed groups retain close ties to the communities they hail from but are often also estranged from them because they begin misusing their role as ‘security providers’ and start to draw on forms of capital associated with outsiders.²⁵ Having one foot in both these spheres makes armed groups trans-scalar brokers constantly bargaining between multiple loyalties. Under such conditions, furthermore, it is exactly the withholding of loyalty and manufacturing of insecurity with regards to alliances that are valuable resource for armed groups in turbulent political marketplaces. This is also what Judith Verweijen finds

²⁵ . What Gilbert Joseph writes for Latin American bandits also holds for Congolese armed groups: ‘long-term profit and survival also meant forging some kind of relationship with the elite’ (1990: 13).

when she analyses what makes Congolese armed groups so influential. It is because armed groups straddle so many different settings, she argues, that they can play different factions off against each other, increasing their own position in the political marketplace in the process (Verweijen 2016: 58).

Additionally, one should not assume that armed groups are necessarily interested in business continuity. Like in the mining sector, armed groups can be 'shell companies' solely for purposes of hiding political interests or set up uniquely to benefit from the funds associated to donor-sponsored integration schemes (Vogel 2014). In other cases, commanders often break off with a faction from a leader that becomes too compromised by his outside patron and start a breakaway company under a new name. This was the case for instance for the NDC-Rénové, currently eastern Congo's largest armed group, which in 2014 broke away under the leadership of Guidon, from the NDC rebel group headed by Sheka (CRG 2020: 16); in 2020, yet another faction broke away from NDC-R, in all appearances in a row over the internal distribution of the mineral rents. In fact, so many of today's armed groups are breakaways from earlier ones that this seems to be a fashionable business practice in today's political marketplace. This dynamism of the market implies a certain factor mobility of military labor—and indeed many armed group members integrate into the army only to defect again or temporarily join a competing 'firm'.²⁶ For instance, because the NDC-R has been expanding so aggressively into Masisi territory, smaller Nyatura factions there are reportedly eager to integrate into that armed group, to ensure a livelihood and proximity to their communities (ibid: 40).

In part, this short-term fluctuation is a good proxy for the instability of political bargains. In part, this dynamism is also due to the fact that cash funding in this political marketplace is, for a change, *not* 'extraverted' (i.e., contingent on outside funding) but heavily decentralised and localised. Women and men under arms full-time cannot dedicate themselves to cultivating or other forms of subsistence to feed themselves, and thus have to engage in the oldest forms of supplying war (Van Creveld 1977), namely demanding or extorting contributions there where they are deployed. This gives rise to ad hoc or more durable foraging strategies, for instance raising roadblocks or periodically collecting in-kind contributions, that, as will be discussed further down, can easily turn into ends in and by themselves for armed people.

²⁶ . Additionally, it has often been repeated that there is an abundant supply of young men who are because of conflict nudged to take on weapons to attain social mobility (Vlassenroot & Van Acker 2001), making them a cheap labor factor of production to put it crudely.

4. The Congolese army: dominant firm or platform economy?

The structure of Congo's violent political marketplace can be better understood by taking a closer look at a key player the market—the Congolese army. With an estimated 120,000 'actually existing' soldiers²⁷, the FARDC is the third largest army in Africa, and by far the largest institutional security actor in the eastern Congo. At the same time, it is also one of the least funded armies in Africa, and so fragmented that considering it a unitary 'actor' probably hides more than it reveals. In fact, it might be more useful to consider the FARDC a marketplace all onto itself.

Military business: *la création*

As a legacy of Mobutu's strategy to keep the army weak, the Congolese army today is overstaffed and underfunded. A lot of competing power-networks inside the army cross-cutting formal chains of command. They are patronage networks, which don't only follow ethnic lines, but also loyalties built during the Congo Wars, other campaigns, or joint business ventures. Whereas many modern armies are sophisticated logistical apparatuses geared towards just-in-time delivery of supplies to soldiers engaging in the last generation network-centric warfare, the Congolese army is sophisticated in exactly the obverse way: it is a vast network of loosely integrated units that are systematically required to send up the proceeds of their own wealth creation.

Key to the dynamism of the army is therefore a specific skill that soldiers call *la création*, which is the entrepreneurial quality of the capacity to be able to see opportunities everywhere to make a business out of one's uniform and weapon. This is epitomised in the expression *civil azali bilanga ya militaire*, 'the civilian is the [corn] field of the military' (Baaz & Stern 2008: 65). These revenue-generating activities can range from conventional strategies such as roadblocks along roads and periodic collection of the *ration militaire* in villages to kidnapping, organised robberies, and other violent crimes. Just to give an idea, in Rutshuru, the army traffics charcoal produced by the FDLR in protected areas; in the area around Beni, some of the key commanders are deeply involved in the logging business, in Bafwasende they mainly poach, while units in Walikale (North Kivu) and Fizi (South Kivu) are deeply involved in mining. Across the board, the military is a key actor in the markets for marijuana and ammunition (Laudati 2016). So fragmented is the army and so crucial *la création* that individual army units can be found battling one another for control of a checkpoint or because they service different patrons in a similar niche.

Lower levels in the army are connected to their superiors via *le système*, a system of informal upward profit sharing, commonly called 'feeding the horse' (*koleisa mpunda*), *opération retour*, *rétrocession* or *rapportage*: soldiers are granted license for illicit revenue generation activities

27 <https://issat.dcaf.ch/Learn/Resource-Library/Case-Studies/Chain-of-payments-project-within-the-Armed-Forces-of-the-Democratic-Republic-of-Congo-FARDC>.

in return for a periodically show of 'appreciation' or gratitude to their commanders by making symbolic or more institutionalised contributions; commanders, in turn, have to report wealth back further up the chain—which often follows the parallel hierarchies of trust networks instead of the formal military hierarchies on paper. Of course, because wealth acquisition is so important a function of the army, commanders compete to deploy their proteges to areas where money can be made, because money flows upwards. The way wealth travels in these networks isn't based on either market exchange or bureaucratic norms but seems operate according to another moral economy, involving a mix of merit and more tribute- or gift-like features. It involves voluntarily offering 'appreciation' to one's superior next to the obligatory weekly sum that has to be reported for a checkpoint. If the system functions smoothly, every step has eaten (*échelon aliaki*), brokers at all scales of these military networks have benefited from the dividends of lower positions (Titeca & Nkuku 2019).²⁸ Commanders will demote or redeploy their subordinates according to their capacity for *la création*. Soldiers and commanders are rewarded for loyalty and military successes in terms of deployments in *esika ya miel*, ('the land of honey', i.e. lucrative places, cf. Baaz & Olsson 2011), giving them temporary control over a busy checkpoint which can yield thousands of dollars a week, or deploying them around productive artisanal mines where they can engage in revenue-generating activities by manufacturing protection rackets or monopoly markets in essential consumption goods.

Military service provision

Whereas this makes it easy to cast aside the Congolese army as one big criminal money-making scheme, many of these practices, far from undermining the army's formal role, also contribute to its reproduction (cf. Moshonas 2019). From the perspective of the *Maison Militaire* in Kinshasa, allowing individual units to engage in their own business also is a cheap way assuring a level of military presence across the country that would otherwise be prohibitively costly. Additionally, local army units still get involved in settling civilian disputes and provide security where they are deployed (Baaz & Verweijen 2014), which in turn bestows a certain 'social license to operate' on the army.

Additionally, there are certain services that only the army can provide. With many different entrepreneurs of violence in a same geographic space, eastern Congo is a saturated market for protection, meaning that particularly transport operators and smugglers have to buy off many different, competing armed actors and public authorities along their supply chains,²⁹ attested by the panoply of roadblocks and transit taxes along trade routes (Schouten, Murairi, Kubuya 2017). Bigger economic players will want to reduce these transaction costs. Such larger tenders for protection can only be fulfilled by providers who have built up economies of scale

²⁸ Of course, subordinates also have an incentive to *yiba moke*, 'steal cleverly', and to monetize the information they have about circulating wealth by withholding it from their superiors (Kisangani 1998: 117-8).

²⁹ During the Second Congo War, mineral smugglers could ensure protection by offering army commanders in control of portions of the supply chain each a Land Cruiser and the armed group controlling the mine the equivalent of a Land Cruiser in cash (Bwenge 2003).

in the market for force. Smuggling large volumes of minerals or teak calls for stable protection rackets by providers able to offer services marked both by horizontal integration (being able to offer protection at larger geographical scales), and vertical integration (protection both from high-level administrative harassment and local disruptions). The FARDC has an overall incumbent advantage in the marketplace for protection not because it has a monopoly over force—it doesn't—but rather because of what Englebort (2009: 6) calls the 'exchange value of legal command' as well as its horizontal integration, that is, its larger 'network coverage', including control over main roads, than for instance Mai Mai groupings which have a very patchy presence and mostly cater to more local and remote consumer markets. The army's protection services are modular: it is possible to flexibly scale up and down demand by 'renting' a few soldiers for static protection or escorts, to 'purchase' the loyalty of a commander responsible for a stretch of road, or scale up and put a general on one's advisory board. The FARDC can also sway prospective clients with additional benefits of signing up, such as heavily reduced import and export tariffs and the possibility to transport one's goods in vehicles owned or protected by the military, thus implying exemption from taxes at the many army roadblocks as well as a lower risk of incurring losses through ambushes and robberies (Schouten, Murairi & Kubuya 2017, cf. Verweijen 2016). Thus, in eastern Congo, larger commercial actors all have a business understanding with key generals to assure safety along key stretches of roads; some transport companies have been blacklisted by international NGOs for being too closely associated with individual military entrepreneurs.³⁰

The army and armed groups

A main reason why Congo's main 'firm' in the coercion business is so fragmented is because it has been shaped by a very partial integration of former belligerents, and the subsequent absorption and rebranding of start-ups of very different stripes, without effectively changing their business practices or creating the 'team spirit' necessary for a convincing brand identity (see Baaz & Verweijen 2013).

Due to the combination of the pervasiveness of *auto prise en charge* (decentralised financing) and the fact that the FARDC is an amalgamation of competing loyalties, the FARDC can be likened to a kind of 'platform economy', an infrastructure through which users get to pursue their own business plans, as long as they click 'agree' to sending a portion of their proceeds up the chain. Under such conditions, the army paradoxically sometimes achieves its military objectives more efficiently bypassing its own convoluted chain of command and engaging the services of armed groups. Indeed, while between 1996 and 2013 regional countries played critical roles in engaging the services of local armed groups as proxies, the FARDC has since a been just as important a source of support to armed groups as neighbouring countries. As an example, the FARDC in Beni asked Mai Mai Mazembe to secretly dislodge the ADF from one position in terrain Mazembe is familiar with, and the responsible rebel commander

³⁰ Source: individual consultations with NGO logistical officers.

was awarded a lieutenant post in the army and three months of command over a profitable checkpoint at the entrance to Beni.³¹

But perhaps the best example of this kind of outsourced military governance is the NDC-Rénové, currently the largest of 120 active armed groups in the Kivus. This armed group started in Walikale in 2014, where it since the start maintained profitable business relations with local army commanders. NDC-R would barter gold from the mining sites it controlled against ammunition, and engage in taxation rackets of artisanal mining sites that were just like joint ventures, for instance allow the army a trade monopoly over certain commodities retaining taxation of artisanal miners for itself. Later on, various factions within the army—in part the Banyarwanda network—would support the aggressive expansion of NDC-R from Walikale into other portions of North Kivu, in part because it effectively helped to rout the FDLR from hard to reach places (CRG 2020). In turn, the alliance with the FARDC served as a platform for the NDC-R to build an economy of scale around horizontal integration of gold mining and a taxation system through tickets (*jetons*) across an ever-expanding territory.³² Of course, among the remaining armed groups in North Kivu, this enduring FARDC-NDC-R collusion raised serious antitrust concerns, because they saw their market shares and even their business continuity imperiled. Ultimately, the practices of the army strongly resemble those of armed groups, most notably in eastern Congo, pointing to the convergence of actor behaviors under pressure from political and economic forces.

At the same time, the use of armed group proxies is an important source of revenues for army commanders. First, because they are stationed in an 'operational zone' they are accorded more operational funds, weaponry and ammunition. This increases their capital stock which commanders can 'eat'—or, in some cases, use as a budget to barter and bargain with armed groups over control of mining sites etc. For instance, Walikale is considered an 'operational area', yet there are hardly any operations against armed groups (CRG 2020: 45). Instead, different commanders have profited handsomely from control over gold mines, and from bartering weapons and ammunition for gold with NDC-R (Matthysen, Schouten & Spittaels 2019). Similarly, the Congolese army staged unilateral operations against the ADF late 2019, without, according to an insider, believing in their possibility to succeed—but in the meantime it allowed them to obtain important cash flows that they could pocket. Additionally, the operational zone around Beni has for years been an important area for illegal logging overseen by army commanders, making them benefit doubly from 'selling' the ADF threat.³³ Army units deployed in armed group zones can even engage in pro-forma operations to keep up appearances, but coordinate with the armed group beforehand, staging a 'defeat' in which the armed group captures ammunition as a 'resource' to bargain for more operational funds from the military hierarchy. Even if the hierarchy might be aware of the local political economy

31 Source: interview with the commander concerned, Goma, 2018.

32 To add to the complexity, while the FARDC works through NDC-R, this armed group in turn is able to hold so much territory by farming out taxation to local authorities (CRG 2020: 48).

33 Source: confidential comments, analyst.

in which commanders are involved, they might consider this a low-cost way of keeping control, because they still retain leverage over the commanders who collude with armed groups (cf. Verweijen 2016: 41-2).

And even if the Congolese army might be engaged in serious operations to dislodge specific armed groups, only seldom do they keep durable control of areas formerly under armed group control. Often they instead withdraw to conduct operations elsewhere, leaving behind security vacuums and fragmentation in their wake. As these temporary interventions do not upend the structural demand for protection nor the structural opportunity to monetize violence, they at most stir the alphabet soup of armed groups, without reducing their ubiquity or importance. Consequently, the whole idea of fixed territorial control gives way to a military landscape impossible to map, because many areas are under interspersed control of armed groups and the Congolese army; and as the latter is working with one armed group to fight another, who does what where becomes opaque even for insiders. The Congolese army, however, does want to keep a close leash on the demobilisation and reintegration of rebels—these militia are resources that can bring in government money as well as ‘strategic stockpiles’ that can be moved around and used as cheap recruits, or be deployed in parallel networks—and the serial numbers on the stashes of arms they hand in might be an embarrassment to the army.³⁴

In sum, it can be said that the Congolese army forms a central but ambiguous conglomerate in Congo's violent political marketplace. First, the FARDC can be seen as a ‘platform economy’, a state-sanctioned constellation of networked business ventures that generate material benefits for officers and, to some extent, foot soldiers. Secondly, the FARDC acts as a commercial entrepreneur ‘selling’ protection services to buyers in a commodified market for protection services. Thirdly, senior officers use their military positions as the basis for political entrepreneurship, as political financiers or by using their capacity for organized violence as a bargaining chip for political leverage. And lastly, when a high level actor (such as a government) wants to deploy violence efficiently in pursuit of a narrow military objective, the formal structure of FARDC isn't the preferred instrument.

34 Thanks to head of DDR MONUSCO-SK.

5. Conclusions

Ever since Mobutu lamented that 'everything is for sale' in Congo, transactional politics, corruption and patronage have been central to the vocabulary of Congo analysts. The political marketplace framework forms a logical extension of such research and offers powerful tools to analyze the way in which violence and cash are deployed in the pursuit of expanding or holding onto power. This paper has emphasized Congo isn't an integrated political marketplace, but instead hinges on networks of power that operate in and between different local marketplaces and the national marketplace centered on Kinshasa.

The PMF is able to capture the transactional nature of power and how bargaining for power, rent seeking and patronage often trumps ideological commitments. It raises questions which have not received the attention they deserve in expert studies on Congo's political dynamics, regarding the deal-making that goes on *dans les coulisses du pouvoir* and the structural incentives to keep on doing so, despite—or thanks to—outside interventions. Looking forward, the political marketplace framework offers a real opportunity to learn more about political deal-making in Congo, in a time in which the national political scene is in profound flux.

Up until the elections of 2018, Congo's national political marketplace was characterized by the exclusionary tendencies of Joseph Kabila's presidency, which had built out his control over the most important formal and informal sources of patronage in Congo—comprising both steady sources of cash and loyalists in key positions. However, since the peaceful formal transition of power into the hands of Félix Tshisekedi, Congo's national political marketplace is turning into an unstable duopoly, with Tshisekedi attempting to disrupt Kabila's *de facto* control over real political power. This contestation at the top has not meant good news for dynamics in many of Congo's subnational political marketplaces, where it instead seems to have triggered increasing reliance by local political entrepreneurs on armed groups for purposes of bargaining. In different parts of eastern Congo, armed group violence has increased considerably in the first year of Tshisekedi's presidency, and dynamics in Djugu, Rutshuru, and Beni are highly volatile.

The political marketplace framework offers a unique entry-point into such key political dynamics, and point to gaps in academic knowledge of the business of political deal-making in Congo. Stringing together examples from Congo's recent past, this paper has tried to demonstrate the real promise that the PMF holds to enrich our understanding of key aspects of Congo's complex political reality. However, some of the same dynamics just mentioned point to where Congo's many realities can also stand to enrich the PMF. A first point of expansion considers the status of violence. The violence in Djugu, for all the bargaining that will hopefully soon be uncovered to lie behind it, assumes levels of cruelty that are difficult to imagine in terms of transactional politics, just like the Rwandan genocide is impossible to grasp as political deal-making by other means. Yet the consequences of violence (and

especially some types of violence such as 'demographic warfare') structure political markets substantially, and create norms and institutions about what types of dealmaking remains or becomes permissible. Thus, it seems that the PMF is only applicable within certain bandwidths of violence—there is a minimum level of permissible violence in society necessary for the PMF to function, but beyond a certain threshold, deal-making seems to break down.

A second enrichment of the PMF from Congo could be found in the many brakes on bargaining through cash and coercion. Not just anyone can strike a bargain with anyone; armed groups are not interchangeable providers of security in ethnically fractured social landscapes; moral economies and inclinations to resist the accumulation of power distort and put brakes on transactional politics at every turn (cf. Hoffmann, Vlassenroot & Mudinga 2020). For every traditional chief who converts his customary capital into cash or coercive capacities, there is a traditional lineage which preside over immense value of land which they refuse to exchange for patronage, cash and influence. Beyond marketplaces revolving around cash and coercion, other forms of capital—customary, traditional, ethnic, charismatic and spiritual—play just as important roles in social fields that entangle with and condition exchanges mediated by force and dollars. Indeed, looking forward, it is probably at the imbrication of these different logics that the most productive academic advances are to be made.

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